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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 YEREVAN 000186

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DEPT FOR EUR/CARC, DS/IP/EUR, DS/IP/ITA
NSC FOR MARIA GERMANO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/02/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: ARMENIA SITREP: ARMY CALLED IN TO RESTORE ORDER;
STATE OF EMERGENCY DECLARED; 8 DEAD; EX-PRESIDENT UNDER DE
FACTO HOUSE ARREST; CALM IN CAPITAL

REF: YEREVAN 179

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Classified By: CDA Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Calm prevailed in Yerevan March 3, after pitched battles between opposition protesters and security forces ended in the early hours of March 2. Official GOAM reports state that eight people died in the armed clashes, 33 police were injured, and 100-200 injured overall, although a higher death toll is widely suspected. Authorities declared a state of emergency in Yerevan through March 20. Heavily armed police and military units are posted throughout the city. A media blackout has been placed in effect, with media authorized only to broadcast officially-sanctioned information on the Situation, and independent on-line wire services and blogs shut down. There is widespread public skepticism of the official story that protesters in Freedom Square had been armed before authorities used force to clear them out. Ex-president Levon Ter-Petrosian (LTP) remains under de facto house arrest, and has called on his supporters to postpone further protests until the end of the state of emergency. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Relative calm reigns in downtown Yerevan as of 16:00 local time, 36 hours after the end of pitched clashes between protesters hurling Molotov cocktails and riot police shooting tracer fire overhead. The battles erupted just after 21:00 local time on various downtown streets adjacent to the Italian, French, and Russian embassies, as well as city hall, the "Moscow House" and a small adjacent shopping district. The confrontation ended at approximately 04:30 on March 2. The overall number of protesters ranged between 15,000 - 25,000, but their size gradually shrank in the early hours of March 2, when protesters effectively disbanded after a key LTP ally read a statement from the ex-president urging them to disperse. Over the course of Saturday afternoon, March 1, the demonstrators had armed themselves with numerous makeshift weapons -- rocks and paving stones, Molotov cocktails, pipes and lengths of wood -- and had constructed a layered defense of barricades using commandeered vehicles, park benches, and other local materials. By mid/late afternoon, a significant cohort (several thousand) of the crowd were clearly spoiling for a fight. However, contrary

to the official government position, and based on numerous firsthand accounts from a wide range of sources (including embassies), we have seen no evidence that anyone among the crowd of protesters had firearms or anything other than makeshift weaponry. We believe that all firearms were in the hands of government forces.

13. (C) Government forces began their assault on the protesters' fortified positions at about 21:10 -- as poloff was on the phone with an opposition negotiator attempting to broker a last-minute settlement between the two sides. Security forces began their action by firing thousands of rounds into the air, including tracer bullets along with conventional rounds, seemingly with the purpose of scaring away protesters with a noisy show of force. This seemed to have some effect in scattering the less committed members of the mob, but a sizeable core group of supporters stayed on, chanting "Levon, Levon." They were urged on by radical LTP ally Nicol Pashinian and other cheerleaders. Riot police then tried to clear the mob with a shield charge, but were pushed back. There are indications that some police or soldiers eventually did turn their weapons fire directly on protesters, but this seems to have been very limited. The situation remained stalemated until a statement arrived from LTP urging the crowd to disperse, which it then promptly did, leaving just a small band of several dozen of the most dogmatic for police to clear away. Overall, protesters had effectively controlled an area of four square blocks for about twelve hours, indulging in some small-scale looting (most notably of a food store, from which they looted booze and foodstuffs) and burned out a number of cars, including police vehicles.

14. (C) LTP had earlier urged protesters to remain in the streets until he personally came to their position, but he eventually changed this stance in the early hours of March 2. An attempt to enlist the Catholicos (head of the Armenian

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church) as an intermediary to negotiate an end to the crisis was reportedly rebuffed by LTP. Other LTP allies, such as David Shahnazarian and Levon Zurabian, had negotiated with police March 1 to relocate the crowd to Matenaderan manuscript museum (a frequent venue for political events), but the crowd refused to go. The government's human rights ombudsman was also on the scene attempting to negotiate peacefully, as were two members of parliament from the opposition Heritage Party, but without success.

15. (C) Late on March 1 the Armenian Parliament convened an extraordinary session where they approved the presidential declaration of a state of emergency in Yerevan (septel), effective through March 20 (unless extended), which prohibits all public gatherings and rallies and forbids political news broadcasts. During the evening of March 1, army units were deployed to the capital, with armored personnel carriers and troops taking up position around the city. On March 2, Army Chief of Staff Colonel-General Seyran Ohanyan warned citizens in a televised statement to avoid gathering in public, even in small numbers. He declared that soldiers would "strictly" counter any attempts to stage new anti-government rallies. Army units on March 2 continued to patrol government installations, key squares and parks, and streets and bridges. Police units closed off certain streets leading to the center of town, but these checkpoints were lifted as of early morning March 3.

16. (C) Official reports state that eight died as a result of the clashes, including an innocent bystander struck by a stray bullet as she watched events unfold on her balcony. Protesters represent most of the fatalities reported so far, but there are rumors that the death toll is higher. 33 police were injured in the clashes, and Armenia's Health Minister said on March 2 that 230 people had been treated so far at Yerevan hospitals. When special forces tried to break up one end of the assembled protesters at approximately

21:10, media reports declared that bullets could be heard overhead, but their source could not be ascertained. Emboffs residing near the clashes heard shooting and explosions from Molotov cocktails, which picked up around midnight on March 1, and RSO personnel saw tracer fire in the air at the same time. One member of parliament was apparently stabbed during the clashes when he tried to stop several people from beating a policeman. The MP later alleged the beating was a provocation undertaken by authorities to put protesters in a negative light. He was subsequently hospitalized and remains in stable condition.

17. (C) According to data provided by LTP aides, over 50 protesters were detained following the clearing of Freedom Square early on March 1 and afterwards. Among those detained at that point and then subsequently released were ex-prime minister Hrant Bagratian, former foreign minister Alexander Arzumanian, and current chairman of LTP's Armenian National Movement, Ararat Zurabian. Two members of parliament, who supposedly possess immunity from criminal prosecution, were also detained late on March 2 for planning a coup d'etat. Both are key leaders of two different Karabakh war veteran organizations. Among the reported detained also figure two U.S. citizens, who are currently being held by the National Security Service. LTP's camp says three of their supporters are still unaccounted for.

18. (C) Poloffs surveyed the aftermath of the clashes at approximately 11:00 am on March 2 in the downtown area, where the army had dispatched hundreds of troops, positioned heavily armored personnel carriers, medical vans, and concertina wire. An area of about 2 square miles, including the perpendicular thoroughfares connecting the adjacent Italian and French embassies with Yerevan's municipality and the Russian diplomatic mission were strewn with overturned buses, army jeeps and vans, many of which had been burned out during the clashes. Rocks, glass, and debris littered the streets, and some storefronts had been vandalized and looted.

(NOTE: Protesters deny police reports that they were to blame for the destruction of private property, and accuse the authorities of using provocateurs to tar the otherwise peaceful opposition. END NOTE.) The intersection connecting downtown with Victory Bridge still had a tipped-over bus and several yards of landscaping dirt barricading the road. Police cruisers were using their loudspeakers to order bystanders to disperse and leave the various scenes.

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19. (C) Ex-president and opposition leader Levon Ter-Petrosian remained under de facto house arrest on March 13. A Poloff in the vicinity of LTP's home at 13:00 local time on March 2 witnessed security forces stop and check LTP's armored vehicle (inside and trunk) as it tried to leave the premises. The 20 or so security forces also stopped and thoroughly searched a vehicle with LTP aides that subsequently arrived at the scene. LTP aides tell us that none of LTP's political lieutenants are allowed into the house, except for David Shahnazarian. Shahnazarian's daughter is married to LTP's son, and the couple lives in LTP's house, so Shahnazarian is granted access as a family member. In the afternoon of March 1, Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian publicly stated LTP was not under house arrest, that he was free to leave his home if he signed a document acknowledging that security forces could not guarantee his safety outside his residence, and if he also forsook the services of his current bodyguards from Armenia's State Protection Service (SPS), an offer the ex-president has yet to accept. In subsequent press conferences that LTP has given in his Soviet-era presidential mansion, he has asked his supporters to refrain from gathering anew until the end of the state of emergency on March 20.

110. (C) The state of emergency also prescribes a media blackout, with all news outlets forbidden to publish any information on the current political situation which is not

furnished by the state. Armenia's on-line news agencies stopped updating their own reports on the situation late on March 1, though the Prague-based Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty site has continued their own English-language reporting. Radio Liberty broadcasts are no longer being carried on Armenian radio affiliates. Even before the state of emergency had been declared late on March 1, local feeds of the Paris-broadcast Euronews (in Russian and Armenia languages) and U.S.-broadcast CNN were interrupted whenever Armenia-related news appeared. Late-breaking reports indicate that security agencies on March 3 have begun to bar access to various independent on-line websites. At 13:30 local time, the independent AlPlus wire service said the National Security Service had shut down access to its website. Lragir.am, another independent wire service, reported the same thing. Panorama.am says they are posting only official information on their site, as prescribed by the state of emergency, but their site has also apparently been blocked. The Armenian version website of RFE/RL has also been blocked, but audio news can still be accessed through the RFE/RL armenialiberty.org website.

¶11. (C) Average citizens on the street appear visibly upset by developments in the capital. While dozens of young army recruits in full battle dress patrolled a popular market area and public park, local market vendors told Poloff in the early evening of March 2 that they were sickened by the turn of events, and blamed the authorities for the senseless loss of life and pitting of innocent citizens against one another. None of the 20 or so surveyed late on March 2 believed the official televised version of events -- whereby police decided to clear Freedom Square early on March 1 after learning that protesters had recently armed themselves. Almost everyone rhetorically asked why protesters didn't use any of the weapons shown on TV -- grenades, pistols, metal bars, homemade metal instruments -- if they indeed held them in their possession.

¶12. (C) The violence that erupted on March 1 has resulted in the postponement of a planned visit by a top Vatican envoy. The Vatican's number two, Secretary of State Cardinal Taarcisio Bertone, was scheduled to visit Armenia March 2-6, but postponed his visit in light of current events. Vatican flags that had been placed around the city on February 29 were abruptly removed by the morning of March 3. The Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) dispatched a special envoy on March 2 to try to mediate between the government and the opposition. OSCE envoy Heikki Talvitie, former European Union Special Representative for the South Caucasus from 2003 to 2006, was dispatched by OSCE chairman-in-office, Finish Foreign Minister Ilkka Kanerva. In a public statement, Kanerva urged the authorities to release those detained during the violence, and for both sides to engage in dialogue to avoid further casualties and further escalation of tension.

¶13. (U) On March 2, president-elect and Prime Minister Serzh YEREVAN 00000186 004.2 OF 004

Sargsian issued a statement to Armenian's citizens on the events of the last two days. The text follows:

"Dear countrymen, as a result of the recent events, our people have suffered heavy losses: there were victims among both policemen who were carrying out their duty, and protesters who fell under the influence of a group of people. Hundreds of citizens suffered as a result of the illegal actions of the radical opposition.

The revolutionary leaders of the so-called "movement" made those who defended public order and their supporters the target of their insatiable ambitions. The organizers and inciters of the disorders will still answer for all this before the law, history and future generations. I note with pain that our compatriots became the victims of blind hatred of some people.

Today I share everyone's grief and wish all of you strength
and spirit to overcome this disaster.

End text.

PENNINGTON